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ABSTRACT

A study in Japan investigated second language skill loss and maintenance in three groups of English-as-a-Second-Language learners: (1) ninth graders studying basic vocabulary and sentence structures (true beginners); (2) students in the lowest level English class at a technical college, but with some English language skills (false beginners); and (3) successful students in the highest level English class at the college (successful learners). The research explored in what areas false beginners encountered backsliding, in which areas false beginners achieved better than true beginners, and what the main problems of false beginners were. Data were gathered using a standardized test of written and spoken (read-aloud) English, and a list of both regular and irregular English words, read aloud. Results indicate that the false beginners' backsliding occurred in comprehension, in which their skill level was about equivalent to that of true beginners. False beginners could read passages aloud better than true beginners, and the main difficulty for false beginners was in recoding and decoding of English words. Contains 17 references. (MSE)

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What Makes Language Learners False Beginners?

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This paper presents an attempt to answer the question, "What makes language learners false beginners?" [1] This study will focus on a particular type of false beginners, a group of Japanese young adult EFL learners, using psycholinguistic approach with data analysis of the participants' interlanguages to discuss the following points:[1] In what area does false beginners' backsliding occur? [2] Are there any areas in which false beginners are better than true beginners? [3] Where does the main problem of false beginners lie? This is a cross-sectional study to identify backsliders' distinctive features. The data are collected from three groups: a true beginners' group, a false beginners' group , and a successful learners' group. The inconsistent results of written test scores and reading performances are explained by the qualitative data analysis of word vocalization, the phoneme level in the micro-structure. [2]

1.Introduction

SLA researchers have discussed the adequacy of contrastive analysis hypothesis (Lado 1957), in which the cause of second language learners' errors is said to lie in the difference between the first language and the second language. A number of substantive findings (Buteau 1979, Duskova 1969, Dulay and Burt 1974) concluded that all learners seem to learn languages in much the same way, which is rather developmental than interlingual (Dulay et al. 1982), disregarding the differences of their first languages. Despite this contrastive analysis has been observed to be successful to some extent[3] in the phonological component of language (Celce-Murcia and Hawkins 1985, H.D.Brown 1987), this research attempts to prove that even the phonological difficulties are not caused so much by the interference of the learner's first language but by a more universal learning mechanism of cognitive processes.

To explain the formation of learners' phonological rules of their interlanguages, Funnel's model is introduced in the discussion below, since there are something in common between the results of Funnel's and my participants' word vocalization.

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2. Method

(1) Research Questions

As the purpose of this study is to investigate the causes of English learners' acquisition difficulties, my goals are : [1] to find out in what area false beginners' backsliding occur, [2] to find out in which areas false beginners are better than true beginners, and [3] to determine where the main problem of false beginners lie.

(2) Participants

The sample was taken from three groups : [1] ninth graders aged fourteen to fifteen who are considered true beginners because they are studying basic vocabulary and sentence structures at school, [2] false beginner students in the lowest level English class at Kawaijuku Trident College, a technical college, with their English levels of STEP 3[4] or below, and [3] successful learner students in the highest level English class at the college, who passed STEP 2 test during high school or after graduation. The true beginners' group language competence is matched with the false beginners' group, while the successful learners' group age is matched with the false beginners' group.

(3) Instruments

The following instruments were used in this data analysis: [1]. A STEP 3 written test paper given in spring of 1994 ; true beginners and false beginners took the test under the same conditions as the actual test. [2] The cards of English short paragraphs used for the STEP interview test in spring of 1996. Three different cards for the interview test (STEP 3, Pre-STEP 2, STEP 2) were used. [3] A list of 40 English words[5]. The words were selected from the vocabulary list in the guidelines for English courses at junior high school issued by the Education Ministry.

(4) Procedure

(a) A STEP 3 written test: A STEP 3 test was given to true beginners and false beginners in order to examine the two groups' proficiency levels. The group of successful learners was exempted from the test because they had already passed STEP 2 during high school or after graduation from high school. (b) Cards for STEP interview tests: All the participants were required to read aloud passages for the interview test, and their reading voices were tape recorded. There were two parts of procedure:

Part 1: True beginners and false beginners read aloud four cards from the STEP 3 interview test, reading each card five times in a row. Three scores were recorded: [1] the time it took to read aloud; [2] frequency of repairs; [3] frequency of pauses.

Part 2: All the participants read out three cards from different levels, STEP 3, Pre-STEP 2, and STEP 2, three times running for each. Scores for these were

recorded.

(c) A list of 40 English words: Each participant was required to read aloud a list of 40 English words as quickly as possible. The words had been classified into a regular word group and an irregular word group, with 20 words for each. Regular words were selected according to the criterion that the words would be comparatively easy to decode in terms of pronunciation depending on the knowledge of English sounds, while irregular words were supposed to require English language learners' conscious learning about the words' pronunciation because of their irregularity.

Instructions specified the objectives of this experiment, to test the rapidity and accuracy of decoding phonetically. When they realized that they had made a mistake, they were allowed to repair it. Also, they were told not to skip any words whose pronunciation they did not know but say them as best they could. The participants' reading performance was tape recorded. The examiner recorded the total time for participants to read the list of each word group, the number of errors, and how they actually pronounced the words.

3. Results and Discussion

(1) STEP 3 scores

Table 1: Differences of STEP 3 Test Scores

Between True Beginners (T.B.) and False Beginners (F.B.)

Variables		Probability
Total Score		0.730
Problem	No.1	0.151
	No.2	0.449
	No.3	0.137
	No.4 A	1.000
	No.4 B	0.230
		p>.05

From the results shown in Table 1, it can be said that there are no significant differences between the two groups in regard to any of the testing items. This means that according to this measurement the two groups' competences in the English language are the same.

A question arises here; Are the results of STEP 3 written test a sufficient test battery to determine the participants' knowledge of English? It is necessary to confirm the validity of the test results. For further investigation to resolve this issue, other instruments were used.

Table 2: Differences of Reading Performance Scores

Between T.B and F.B.

Variables	Probability	
Reading Time 1	0.0070	significant
Time 2	0.1343	non-significant
Time 3	0.0298	significant
Time 4	0.0160	significant
Time 5	0.0148	significant
Repairs	0.0132	significant
Pauses	0.0000	significant

(2) Reading aloud

According to the results, there are significant differences between true beginners and false beginners in regard to every variable; that is, in terms of STEP 3

level evaluation of proficiency quantative
analysis of their reading performance shows
the false beginners' reading performance to be significantly better than that of true beginners.

In every component of the written test battery, it turned out that true beginners and false beginners are at the same level, while false beginners' performance of reading aloud is fairly good compared to that of true beginners. This is a finding regarding the false beginners' superior proficiency that did not emerge in the results of STEP 3 written test.

Can we conclude that false beginners are better than true beginners in regard to oral reading despite their English competences otherwise being the same?

In the next experiment, successful learners, false beginners and true beginners, were compared. Those groups read aloud three different cards three times for each: the interview cards for STEP 3, Pre-STEP 2, and STEP 2. The presupposition was that false beginners' difficulties might reveal themselves if they were required to read more difficult English passages.

Before the experiment, the readability of each passage was checked. The figures of the length of a sentence, the average number of words used in the sentence (S) and the average number of syllables per one word (W) are substituted for the following readability formula.[6]

Readability ease=206.84 - 0.85W - 1,02S

Table 3: Indexes of Readability

	STEP 3	Pre-STEP 2	STEP 2
Reading ease	65.74	60.504	58.372

According to the figures shown in this table, as the higher the STEP level of the text, the lower the index of reading ease. Pre-STEP 2 and STEP 2 require a higher level of English competence than STEP 3.

The aims of this data analysis are [1] to know false beginners' performance with more difficult reading materials, and [2] to compare the results of successful learners' performance with those of false beginners to know if the evaluation by STEP 3 of false beginners as good readers are confirmed. The results are as follows:

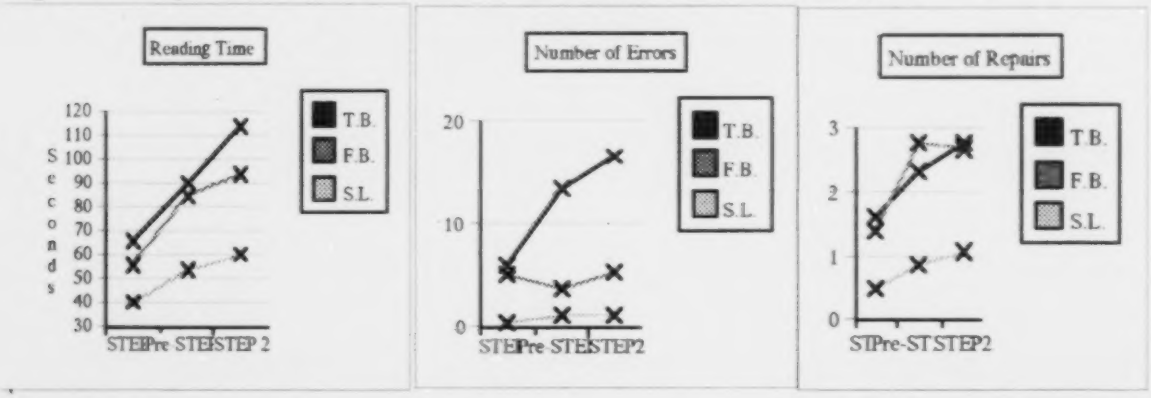


Fig. 1: Reading performances of STEP tests

The graphs above suggest that the oral reading performance of false beginners is between true beginners and successful learners, with whom they share the same English learning history. False beginners' difficulties do not reveal themselves in this experiment. Rather, what is revealed is, the true beginners' inability to cope with unfamiliar words when reading Pre-STEP 2 and STEP 2 interview cards.

The problem still remains; why is it that the false beginners' test scores were as low as true beginners? Also, what makes their reading performance appear better than true beginners? A further test was conducted to explain this inconsistency.

In the next experiment, the participants were required to read forty words aloud, with the words categorized into two groups: one group containing words with a regular spelling-to-sound correspondence, and the other with an irregular spelling-to-sound correspondence.

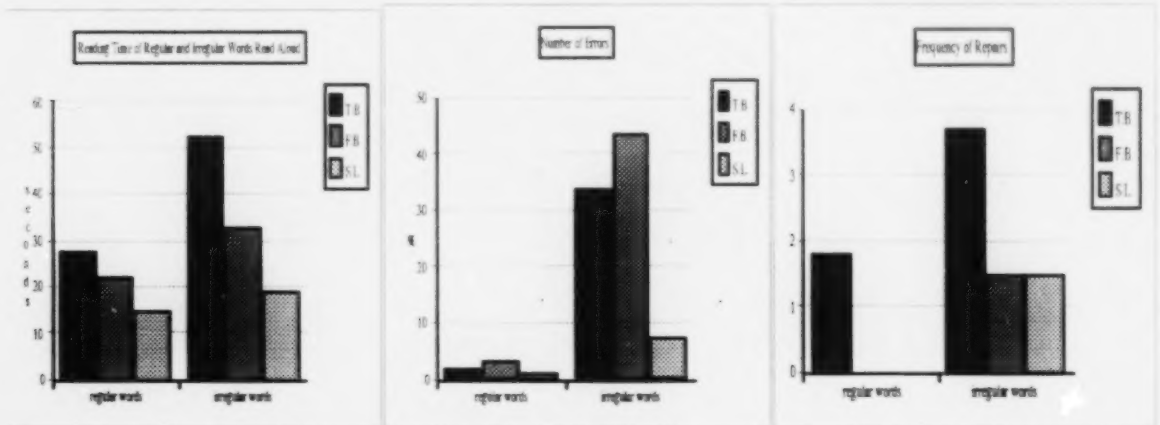
This time, rather than reading English passages, participants read words aloud. This is because factors such as syntax and background knowledge, which participants employ in reading passages, should be eliminated in order to test their very basic linguistic knowledge, phonological decoding and recoding, that is, word vocalization.

For the validity of the results, the frequency and the number of syllables of the words in the two groups are controlled. [7]

Table 4: Frequency of the Words and the Number of Syllables (Mean)

	Standard Frequency Index	The Number of Syllables
Regular Words	59.915	2.3
Irregular Words	59.7	1.45

The following graphs show that all the participants took much more time in reading irregular words than regular words. Also, while there are no apparent differences among the three groups in reading regular words, there are significant differences among them in reading irregular words.



5

Fig.2: Results of word vocalization performances

The ANOVA result shows that the difference in the number of errors between true beginners and false beginners is not significant (p=0.26231). That is, the number of errors each group made is almost the same.

As the next step, qualitative analysis is done to address the question; how can the inconsistency of false beginners' results be explained? There pronunciations were categorized into three groups [1] regularization of irregular words, [2] others, and [3] non-errors.

Table 5 : Proportion of Error Types

Proportion of Error Types (%)			
	regularization	others	non-errors
T.B.	15	2.5	82.5
F.B.	19	6.5	74.5
S.L.	3.5	0.9	98.2

Figure 3 shows that the number of irregular words false beginners read with regular pronunciation is larger than that for true beginners. From the results of time and errors, it is clear that false beginners tend to read aloud quickly while making more errors than the other groups without repairing them. On the other hand, true beginners take much more time than false beginners, in what is called vocalization latency (Perfetti & Hogaboam 1975), to pronounce each word.

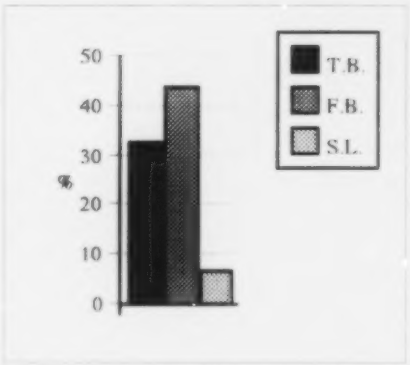
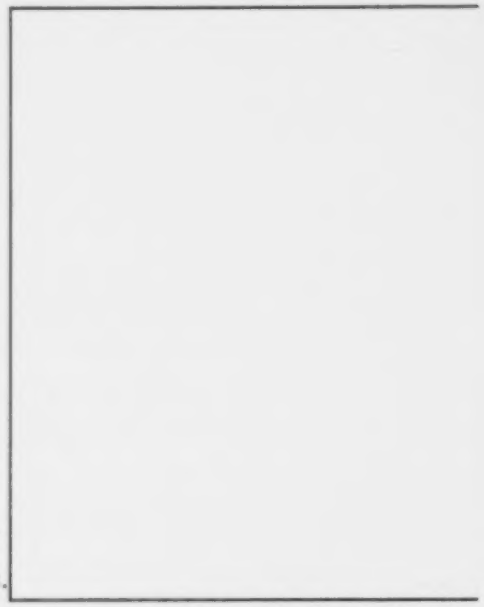


Fig.3: Proportion of regularization of irregular word

True beginners search for the correct pronunciation during testing, and then output it. In most cases they succeed in pronouncing correctly when required to read the words already learned in class, while false beginners do not seem to use the learning strategy of self-correction. Actually, there are no significant differences bètween false beginners and successful learners in reading time and frequency of repairs despite the fact that the number of errors made by false beginners is larger than the other two goups.

Regular reading of irregular words exemplifies the systematicity of interlanguage. Participants' actual prononunciation listed in Table 7 is the interlanguage rule they formulated. SLA researchers have tried to describe the interlanguage rules to prove the systematicity of interlanguages, and to try to explain how and why the rules are formulated and applied. In case of the participants in this experiment, how do they form the pronunciation rule? The following chart offers an account of this system language learners create.

Table 6: Three-route Model of Single Word Reading (Funnell, 1996: 419)



Funnell uses this model in her case study of a subject who had progressive impairment of semantic memory and surface dyslexia. She explains which route the subject takes when meaning is lost; this occurs when the subject depends heavily on grapheme phoneme rules, taking the sublexical route, which bypasses the phonological lexicon included in the other routes. She argues that this can be proved by the subject's word vocalization performance through the regular reading of irregular words. She explains that this pathway enables the subject to read unfamiliar words orally without understanding their meanings. Also, she explains why her subject has problems in comprehension, which is directly connected to semantic code. Because of her deficiency in this area, the subject must take one of the other two routes when required to read words aloud. When she succeeds in pronouncing correctly, she has taken the direct lexical route, which enabled her to pronounce correctly even if her semantic memory broke down. When regular pronunciation of irregular words is observed, she reads them according to spelling-to-sound correspondence, taking the sublexical route which goes through grapheme phoneme rules and directly reaches the phoneme level.

Funnell's theory can be applied to the investigation of the interlanguage used by the language learners in this study. The following table shows the comparison of Funnel's subject's multiple oral reading responses and the participants' responses.

Table 7: Multiple Oral Reading Responses

Funnel's Subject's Responses		False Beginners' Responses	
Stimulus Word	Multiple Responses	Stimulus Word	Multiple Responses
1. subtle	/sʌbtəl/ or /sʌtəl/	hour	/hoə/ or/ɑuər/
2. lose	/ləʊz/ or /luz/	lose	/ləʊz/ or /lu:z/
3. sardine	/sɑdain/ or /sɑdin/	were	/wɛə/ or /wə:/
4. sought	/sɑʊt/ or/sɔt/	through	/θrəʊ/ or /θru:/
5. vase	/veɪs/ or /vɑz/	unite	/junit/ or/junɑit/
6. biscuit	/bɪskɪt/ or/bɪskʊɪt/	fruit	/frʌit/ or /fru:t/
7. spear	/spɛə/ or /spɪə/	dear	/dɛə/ or /dɪə/
8. busy	/bɪzɪ/ or /buzɪ/	minute	/minju:t/ or /mɪnit/

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When regularization of irregular words as in the examples of table 7 is observed, it can be said that the participant takes the sublexical route which does not connect to the semantic system among the three groups. The false beginners have the highest percentage of regularization errors. Also, it is likely that even if they do read irregular words correctly, they may take the direct lexical route, so avoiding the semantic system, which is indispensable for comprehension. That false beginners can read faster than true beginners, despite their comprehension being as low as that of true beginners, can be explained by this three-route model.

Therefore my findings are as follows:

[1] False beginners' backsliding occurs in comprehension. Their level in this area is equivalent to that of true beginners.

[2] False beginners can read passages aloud better than true beginners.

[3] The main problem of false beginners lie in recoding and decoding of English words.

Numbers 2 and 3 of my findings seem contradictory; while false beginners can read passages better than true beginners, they have problems in qualitative analysis of recoding and decoding of English words. Most of the words used in the passages of STEP interview tests are not irregular words but regular words. It has already been shown that false beginners can read regular words aloud without serious problems. If such words are overlearned during six years of formal instruction, the problem does not reveal itself through this test. Moreover, it is likely that reading a list of irregular words is more difficult for them if it is the cause of their difficulties.

4.Conclusion

Funnell's theory offers one clue to the answer to the question; why and how are language learners' interlanguage systems created? The research into people impaired in language performance exposes the mechanisms of language information processing. Funnel's conclusions can be applied to locating the difficulties of second language learners. In the history of interlanguage research, SLA researchers have identified interlanguage rules created by language learners and the systems of the interlanguage continuum, but it is not clearly known how and why these systems are created (Ozasa1992). It is hoped that further research will make the mechanisms of language learning clear.

Unsuccessful learners make a false step from the very beginning of lanugage learning, recoding and decoding phonetically. This hinders them from passing smoothly through the interlanguage continuum; even though the two young adult groups' circumstances, including their learning age and learning environment, are the same, it is this problem with recoding and decoding which makes the acquisition

gap between false beginners and more successful learners wider and wider as they continue to study the second language.

Notes

1)The Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching & Applied Linguistics, 1992, defines "false beginner" as follows: " a learner who has a limited amount of previous instruction in a language, but who because of extremely limited language proficiency is classified as at the beginning level of language instruction. A false beginner is sometimes contrasted with a true beginner, i.e. someone who has no knowledge of the language."

2)This paper is based on the presentation at the 23rd Annual JALT International Conference in Hamamatsu, JAPAN, in October, 1997.

3) H.D. Brown indicated that it was only in the phonological component of language that contrastive analysis was even mildly successful. While Whitman and Jackson (1972:40) concluded that contrastive analysis did not play a major role in predicting syntactic, semantic, or lexical errors. Celce-Murcia and Hawkins (1985:60) felt that CA studies had been fairly successful. Although evaluations differ, it may safely be said that they accept that CA plays a certain role in phonological areas.

4) STEP is short for Society for Testing English Proficiency.

5)Regular words: 1.glad 2.grow 3.fifteen 4.interesting 5.holiday 6.important 7.morning 8.letter 9.November 10.stro 11.remember 12.seventeen 13.yesterday 14.winter 15.woman 16.yellow 17.begin 18.finish 19.tomorrow 20.window

Irregular words:1.August 2.were 3.break 4.child 5.dear 6.country 7.July 8.through 9.fruit 10.famous 11.language 12.hour 13.deciding 14.ninth 15.lose 16.minute 17.unite 18.would 19.shout 20.ground

6) According to Yamada(1984), Flesch listed two major factors which determine the readability of a passage.

7) Frequency was determined by *the American Heritage - Word Frequency Book* (1971).

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